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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching top-down comprehension of spoken language in business Spanish instruction is presented. The approach is based on a model of reading comprehension using successful reading strategies that use-top-down processing, and relies on development of learners' understanding of certain important concepts they will encounter in listening to a passage: situational/interpersonal functions; lexical content; focus; coherence; cohesive structure; tense; case number; mood; and aspect. The technique uses videotape recordings, on which a series of exercises are based. The exercises are designed using a five-stage plan for developing reading comprehension. Adapted for listening comprehension the stages are: (1) prediction/previewing; (2) primary processing; (3) chaining and lexicon recovery; (4) gisting, translating, and summarizing; and (5) role-playing, discussion, and debate. The first four stages are receptive, and the fifth is productive. Specific examples of activities are offered, and a sample lesson is appended. Contains six references. (MSE)

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Developing Listening and Speaking Skills in the Intermediate Business Spanish Class

Todd F. Hughes

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In her 1984 article, Practical Implications of Recent Research in Reading, June Phillips summarized her ideas on successful reading comprehension strategies. The conclusions presented in her article have had a great impact on the classroom practices of a considerable number of traditional language-track instructors. Now is the time for Business Spanish instructors to pay close attention to her ideas. Phillips' findings on how language learners develop comprehension strategies and decoding techniques while reading a written text in a foreign language need to be applied to the development of their abilities to understanding the spoken business-language text. The purpose of this paper is to quickly outline a plan which will demonstrate how Business Spanish instructors can guide their students through a top-down comprehension of a spoken text and, in turn, create structured speaking activities based on the preceding listening activity.

The Phillips model names three factors which interact to provide for comprehension of the foreign language text. These factors, originally defined by Coady (1979), represent different groups of similar cognitive skills which the listener will use to attempt to understand a spoken text. According to Coady, a learner will use their *conceptual abilities* to understand intellectual notions presented in the text. A listener makes use of *background knowledge* to attempt to relate new ideas to previously understood

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concepts. Finally, a learner will use *language process strategies* to decode a foreign language text .

A complex interplay of these three factors gives way to the comprehension of a foreign language text, be it a written or spoken one. The voyage from the unknown to the known, or be it, from the general to the specific, is called *top-down processing* and is the learning style which is the subject of this presentation.

In using top-down processing, the listener will combine their previously mentioned conceptual skills, background knowledge and process strategies in a unique way in order to define the meaning of a text. Business Spanish Instructors can see great advances in their students' ability to report comprehension of the spoken text by using activities which have a top-down processing proposition. To achieve this end, students will often have to listen to a listening selection several times and go through a set of guided questions which will assist their comprehension.

The top-down model which I am proposing in this presentation relies heavily on the development of learners' understanding of certain important concepts that they will encounter in a listening passage. First-hand assumptions, or *situational/interpersonal functions* have been defined by Meyer and Tetrault (1992) as: intent, affect, attitude, modality, role, and person. Additionally, listeners will need to interact with the text in a variety of different ways in order to glean further information about it in terms of its lexical content, focus, coherence and cohesive structure. Finally, only after considerable experience with the text, the learner will then be able to interact with it at an *ideational* level, working with such

concepts as tense, case, number, mood and aspect. By this point, the learner will have reached a more complete comprehension of this text.

Considering this, the question for the Business Spanish Instructor is: How can I facilitate a top-down processing of a listening passage which will allow a college sophomore to understand a spoken text with a business content at an situational, textual and ideational level? This, believe it or not, is not a difficult task. This goal is best achieved through the use of video-based materials. While the difference between traditional audiocassette and videotape is minimal in terms of audio content, videotape media presents a more realistic version of a conversational interchange. With videotape media, students are able to take advantage of non-verbal cues and visible cultural intricacies which are not present on an audiocassette tape. Moreover, the administration of videotape-based lessons is easier for the instructor (Appendix I), as it is often facilitated by visual references in the cut.

In preparing video-based listening comprehension exercises, instructors should consider Phillips' 1984 model for reading, which defines a five-stage plan for developing *reading comprehension.* Phillips designed this plan to assist a teacher in facilitating a learner's understanding of a written text in a foreign language. The stages of her model are:

1) *Preteaching/Preparation* stage
2) *Skimming and Scanning* stage
3) *Decoding/Intensive* reading stage
4) *Comprehension* check

5) *Transferable/integrating* stage

Meyer and Tetrault (1992) have adapted this model for listening. This model contains the elements of Phillips' five stages, but Meyer and Tetrault have time organized them for the development of the listening skill. The Meyer/Tetrault "Five-Stage Teaching Sequence for Reading/Listening" allows for an instructor to tailor activities for the different levels of comprehension of the spoken text. The first four stages of their model are in the "reception mode". They are:

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES
PREDICTION AND PREVIEWING ACTIVITIES

PRIMARY PROCESSING ACTIVITIES
SKIMMING AND SCANNING ACTIVITIES

DECODING ACTIVITIES
CHAINING AND LEXICON RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

TOTAL COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES
GISTING, TRANSLATING, SUMMARIZING ACTIVITIES

The final stage is in the production mode:

INTEGRATIVE ACTIVITIES
ROLE PLAYING, DISCUSSION, DEBATE

The basic goal of the preliminary activities is to develop learners' expectations towards the material that they will hear. In other words, if a listener has no idea as to what they are going to hear (Will it be about a job interview, a sales meeting, an answering machine message?), they will feel impeded when they listen to the passage. The main focus of this preparatory stage is the activation of the schemata that the learner needs to understand the text. The Business Spanish instructor can take a few minutes before an initial interaction with a video segment to brainstorm with his students. After this initial conversational interchange, it is time to show the video segment one time. After this first initial pass, the learner can attempt to:

a) identify the number of speakers in the passage;

b) the possible relationships between the participants;

c) what might have preceded the exchange;

d) and what might follow.

Once this information is established, the learner is ready for a second pass at the video segment.

Upon finishing their second viewing of the video, learners are ready for *skimming* and *scanning* activities, which, according to Meyer and Tetrault, are the primary processing activities. Skimming activities entail the development of general main ideas about the text, while scanning activities entail the search for specific information within the text. A typical skimming activity might be as simple as the question: "Provide a title for this excerpt," "Please paraphrase this passage," or "What is this passage about?" Typical scanning exercises might entail questions relating to specific factual

details in the passage. Questions of the "Who?", "What?", "Where?" and "When?" types are acceptable at this stage. It is important at this stage that the instructor provides the learners with guided activities in a framework or a schematic (written copy) to assist them in listening for specific factual information.

Phillips describes the *decoding* stage as "the assignment of meaning in a detailed and informative way..." (292). She continues to say that the learner must play what Goodman (1968) calls a "psycholinguistic guessing game." At this time, the listener is ready to prescribe meaning to the unknown words in the text. According to Meyer and Tetrault, decoding activities for the listening task can take one of two forms: chaining exercises and lexicon recovery exercises. At this time stage, the Business Spanish instructor will work with members of the class in their quest to identify the meaning of specific lexical items important to the total comprehension of the passage. The instructor will need to guide students toward the goal of defining word meanings in terms of references to a specific phenomenon, or chain. For example: "To what does the educator in the segment refer when he says 'it's unnatural'?" Hence, chaining the expression "it's unnatural" to the act of excessive staring (Appendix II). An additional example would be the following: "During the Jane's job interview with Company X, her interviewer constantly refers to Jane's 'experience.' Please tell me more about her 'experience.'"

The fourth and final receptive stage in the Meyer/Tetrault listening model is called "the comprehension stage." This stage, which involves "an instructional check-up" of a listener's

comprehension of a passage, is basically a feedback measure. At this point the learner will have probably listened to the passage several times, will have gone through several levels of activities and should, for the most part, have a good idea as to the content of the passage. Activities which are appropriate for this stage include the completion of an English gist, a cloze activity or a paraphrase exercise. The goal of this final receptive stage is the solidification of the learner's knowledge base with relation to the passage. More specifically, in terms of the identification of the participants in the exchange, the details of the passage, specific word meanings and how these elements work together to form a cohesive whole: a conversation.

The fifth and final element of the Meyer/Tetrault model, the integrative stage, is the point of departure for communicative activities in which Business Spanish students make use of the new vocabulary, structures and content information acquired while completing the previous four stages of receptive exercises. These integrative activities can take on one of many forms and can be of various levels of difficulty, depending upon students' progress.

An initial integrative activity, suitable after having completed listening comprehension activities based on a videotape segment of a job interview, is the cooperative learning project. In this exercise, students work in small groups to recreate and reinvent the conversational interchange typical of a job interview. In this activity, students can reorder a scrambled script of a conversation, complete a fill-in-the blank exercise, or even work together as a group to recreate microsegments of the interview. At the same time,

students can even "shoot the bull" with each other in the target language, asking questions about their real-life job experience. For example: "Where did you work last summer?" or "Have you ever worked at McDonalds?" or "What was your favorite/worst job?" The results of these interactions can be compiled and compared with the other members from within their small group or with other groups.

In a second, more advanced integrative stage, students can pair off and attempt to actually interview each other. At this time, they should work at recreating the style of interaction present in the video segment that they saw. Initially, this type of "interviewing" should be an informal activity, but at the same time, students should be conscious of making an attempt to recreate the linguistic register which is typical of a job interview.

As a higher-level activity, the instructor can assign a more formal type of task. At this time, students can actually do a serious interview role-play, with a resume and a suit. The instructor can actually videotape this role-play. But, the choice of whether or not to videotape any type of productive activity should be left to the instructor, as it can have positive and negative outcomes. While the mere act of videotaping an activity often makes students feel as though they should treat the exercise as a serious venture (and possibly excel to a higher level of language production), it can also create a great amount of anxiety. If, in fact, the instructor decides to videotape the activity, the videocassettes can be saved for later viewing by the instructor, in small groups or even the entire class. Class members can even make decisions as to whether or not the

interviewees should get the job based upon their performance in the interview, or even critique the interviewer's interrogative skills.

The major purpose of integrative exercises should be to provide students with a chance to attempt to reproduce, in a creative fashion, the language and content from the previously studied in their listening-comprehension activity.

The five-stage model represents a gradual, logical movement from stage one (the prediction of the possible nature of the unknown) to stage five (the integration of the known into a communicative activity). By going through these five stages, not only does the learner reach a better understanding of the contents of a foreign-language text, but at the same time the learner learns how to develop strategies for attacking a new text. Second language listening skills require "...information processing using language skills still in developmental stages and not firmly established in the learner's mind" (Phillips 295). For this reason, the Business Spanish instructor must be conscious of the task at hand (helping the students with the language problem in question), but at the same time, they must also keep "the big picture" in mind--- the development of the students' listening comprehension strategies and speaking skills (Hughes 1995).

APPENDIX I : A Videotape-based Listening Comprehension Lesson

PREPARATORY QUESTIONS:

When was the last time that you went on a job interview? How did it turn out?
Do you like going on interviews? Why? or Why not?
In order to have a successful interview, what things should you do?
What are some things that you should avoid?

SCHEMATIC FOR SKIMMING, SCANNING, LEXICON RECOVERY AND GLOBAL COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL JOB INTERVIEW (first pass)

What are these people doing? What are they talking about?

Match the person (column A) from the clip with their possible identity (column B).

A	B
man in the gray suit (ugly tie)	interviewee
woman in the red jacket	interviewee
gentleman in gray suit (maroon tie)	interviewer
gentleman with black suit (gray tie)	an educator

What is the lady in the red jacket doing? What about the two gentleman who sit across the table from her?

According to the educator in the segment, what are some behaviors that need to be stressed in a job interview? (check all that apply)

_____ Ask plenty of questions.
_____ "Active listening"
_____ Dress "for success."
_____ good body language
_____ plenty of eye contact

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL JOB INTERVIEW (second pass)

Name several characteristics of "active listening:"

"Active listening" is important because (check those that are mentioned in the segment):

_____ Employers perceive you as having more potential.
_____ Interviewees will pick up additional clues about the job.
_____ If you are nervous, your attention will be focused on the interview.

Body language is important because it shows that you are really listening.
_____ true _____ false

In column A you will see various *possible* characteristics of successful body language, as mentioned in the segment. If it is mentioned in the segment, check it. Then, match it with it's negative counterpart from column B.

A	B
_____ Keep both feet on the floor.	Nervously twitch.
_____ Stay relaxed.	Sit back, slump.
_____ Look at the speaker.	Stare intently.
_____ Use a gentle gaze.	Look at your watch.
_____ Sit straight! Don't slouch!	Cross your legs.

Fill in the blank with the appropriate word or expression as mentioned in the video segment.

A job interview can be a difficult experience. But, there are a few things that you can do to make it easier. First of all, be an _____.

Focus your attention on _____ and use _____ to confirm that you are listening. By doing this, the interviewer will perceive you as having more _____. At the same time, you can pick up additional _____ about the job. One thing that you should avoid is excessive _____. Use a _____ which will put the interviewer at ease.

Appendix II: Listening Passage

Active listening is one of the most critical interviewing skills that you need to develop. It can be defined as high level listening where you entire attention is focused on the person speaking. Your body, your face, your eyes all confirm that you are listening.

Active listening is important for two reasons. First, employers are more attracted to active listeners and they are perceived as having more potential. We all like people who really listen to us. Second, through active listening you'll pick up clues about the job that employers are consciously and unconsciously giving you. You can determine what the employer is really looking for. Throughout the interview, sell those qualities.

Use your body language to show that you are truly listening. Be relaxed, but don't slouch. You should always be looking at the speaker, but with a gentle gaze, never a stare. When people speak, they often look away from the listener for five to twenty seconds. But when their eyes return to you, you should be gently looking at them--- not at your watch or at another object in the office. Interviewees are often told to "maintain strong eye contact" while answering questions. Too much eye contact is completely unnatural, studies reveal that in normal conversation the person speaking typically looks away thirty to seventy percent of the time. Now notice what it's like when the interviewee never takes eyes off of the interviewer...

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